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ABSTRACT

Audio conferencing, or teleconferencing, is fast becoming an important method of delivering education to students at a distance. Audio conferencing equipment consists of a convener (speaker) and push-to-talk microphone. Use of the system costs less than using a number of separate telephone lines and is more comfortable for users. Advantages of teleconferencing include interaction between students and teachers, the opportunity for direct feedback to students, cost effectiveness, and ease of use with other supporting instructional materials. Limitations to teleconferencing include technical difficulties, the amount of advance planning and preparation required, the inability to address visually-oriented learning styles, and restrictions on the type of content to be delivered. Teleconferencing can be used effectively if planned thoroughly in advance, and if care is taken to set the environment, encourage participation, and familiarize students with both the instructional materials as well as the medium before the conference begins. This brief guide provides suggestions for conducting an audio conference course effectively, humanizing an audio conference, and encouraging participation. Advantages and limitations of this technology are outlined. (DB)

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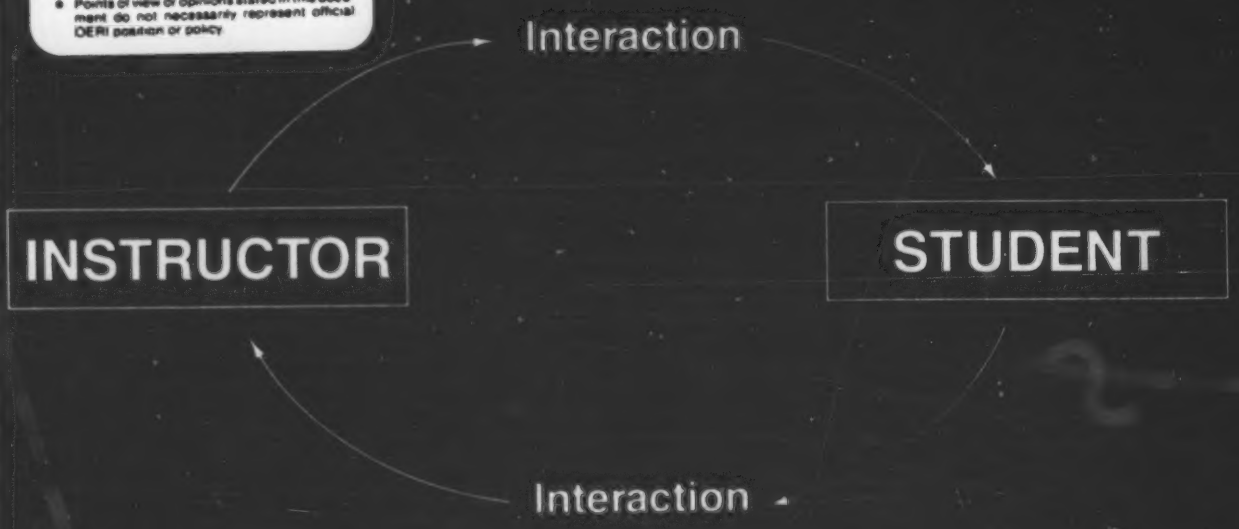

INSTRUCTIONAL AUDIO COMMUNICATIONS AT A GLANCE

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STATEWIDE DISTANCE EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Alaska's interactive audio conferencing network can be accessed by any telephone, anywhere. The network has the capacity to link over 120 sites in a single audio conference or a variable number of sites in a variable number of audio conferences held simultaneously throughout the state.

The statewide system includes more than 330 equipped audio conferencing sites. This equipment consists of a convener (speaker) and push-to-talk microphones. Use of this system costs less than using a number of separate phone lines and is more comfortable for users. Audio conferencing equipment eliminates the need for users to hold a phone to their ear for extended periods of time and provides better sound quality. However, if equipment is not available, any ordinary telephone should work fine.

Because it is so convenient, effective, and relatively easy to use, audio conferencing has become a key method for delivering education to students at a distance—especially to students in rural Alaska who may be hundreds of miles from the nearest post-secondary facility.

CONDUCTING AN AUDIO CONFERENCE COURSE

Generally, techniques of good teaching are the same, whether the learner is in the classroom with the instructor or at a distant location with student and instructor communicating via a push-to-talk microphone coupled to a convener.

However, some teaching techniques have been found to be more effective than others when using audio communications as an instructional medium. The purpose of this brochure is to provide a quick summary of considerations in selecting instructional audio communications and teaching techniques which work best for the medium.

> *A major feature of audio conferencing is its two-way interactive capability. Understanding and using this feature is a key to conducting successful audio conference classes.*

FOR EFFECTIVE USE . . .

To help students focus on content and learning objectives, and not the delivery system, takes planning and forethought. Consider the following suggestions for preparing and conducting an audio conference course.

☐ ***Conference Planning:***

- Structure the content using major concepts to develop topic outlines. (See "Developing Support Materials.")
- Plan short learning segments to avoid "listener fatigue."
- Plan repetition (redundancy) to help students remember the material.
- Simplify the presentation to fit audio-only delivery.
- Plan to present no more than three major concepts per half-hour.
- Encourage participation by:
  - — building in segments for student feedback.
  - — personalizing the learning experience.

☐ ***Program Planning:***

- Determine learner characteristics.
- Select learning objectives — be flexible.
- Select subject content — make it relevant to the learner.
- Arrange "expert" interviews (textbook author, national authorities, local authorities) well in advance.

☐ ***Selecting Format (using the following as a model):***

- Lecture (no single lecture period longer than 10 minutes).
- Question-and-answer session.
- Discussion.
- Small group work at sites OR another lecture period.
- Short class exercises, which may be interspersed with another question period.

☐ ***Selecting Techniques (emphasize interactive capabilities):***

- Panels.
- Interviews.
- Role playing from central location.
- Case studies.
- Reactor panels.
- Brainstorming from individual locations.

☐ ***Developing Support Materials:***

- Printed outline — eliminates need for excessive note-taking; can be used for review purposes. May be combined with topic outline.
- Topic outline — number the major and minor concepts so it's easy to refer to key points for lecture or questions. Leave lots of free space for student notes.
- Written handouts with easy-to-reference headings (use headings as reference points during lecture period).
- Visual materials (slides, photos, videotapes).
- Audio cassettes (see note below).
- Electronic communications (text and graphics delivered via computer, electronic bulletin board, teletext, etc.).
- Other materials including student workbooks, focus/study questions, laboratory materials, syllabus, bibliography, and printed materials and pamphlets.

☐ ***Setting the Environment:***

- Create a relaxed atmosphere.
- Emphasize that communication will become easier as students become familiar with equipment.
- Develop a sense of anticipation.
- Create group rapport.

☐ ***Provide Feedback:***

- Plan question/answer and discussion sessions.
- Schedule group tests.
- Assign individual projects.
- Listen to tapes of class audio conferences for program feedback.

A SPECIAL NOTE ABOUT AUDIO CASSETTES . . . a valuable course supplement

Audio cassettes have many advantages:

- **easy to prepare and edit**
- **can be used for most subject areas**
- **equipment — both to prepare and to use — is simple to operate**
- **can be adapted for group or individual use**
- **convenient to use/easily repeatable**
- **tutorially effective**
- **easy and inexpensive to duplicate**
- **low cost equipment and supplies**

Audio cassettes do have some limitations:

- **not interactive**
- **can be overused, as lecture or "oral textbook"**
- **fixed rate of information flow**

HUMANIZING AN AUDIO CONFERENCE . . .

☐ ***Before the Class Meets:***

- Send students a welcome letter with course objectives, course materials, course requirements, resources available, and college policies.
- Send students a short biographical sketch and picture. If possible have students develop and exchange photos and biographical sketches, too.
- Conduct a pre-course audio conference to discuss the technology and processes of audio conferencing.

☐ ***During the Audio Conference Class:***

- Be yourself — speak in a conversational style.
- Vary your voice and pacing.
- Take an informal roll call.
- Call on students by name, and have students state name before speaking.
- Allow time for responses. Pause 15-30 seconds before continuing or asking again for responses.
- Follow up on individual questions — encourage students to telephone or write the instructor with their questions.
- Telephone or write students with problems.
- Call on each site to insure participation.

☐ ***Other Methods:***

- Request student input by discussion, phone, computer, or mail.
- Write comments, not just corrections, on written assignments.
- Encourage student group meetings — other than for class — where possible.
- Suggest students exchange photographs by mail.
- Select one or two sites (with the most students) and teach at least one audio conference class from those sites. Meet with students before or after class.
- Try "facilitating" in which students are responsible for leading discussions.

ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION . . .

☐ ***Plan for interactive periods,*** as suggested in the sample format. Case studies, role-playing, and question/answer sessions encourage participation.

☐ ***Prepare the group for participation*** — emphasize group sharing.

☐ ***Develop an annotated roster and use it*** — encourage participation based on student backgrounds and interests.

☐ ***Use printed materials to stimulate participation.*** Ask the class or individual students to be ready to discuss one of the "readings" for the week, or assign a study question for reaction during the following class.

☐ ***Structure the participation*** using direct questions (to specific individuals or sites), student reports, interviews, role-playing, and other interactive formats.

☐ ***Control domination*** by any one individual or site.

☐ ***Listen carefully*** — acknowledge student contributions.

TIPS TO REDUCE "MIKE FRIGHT"

- Ask all new students to say a few words about themselves or answer **simple direct** questions at first (non-challenging questions, e.g., about the site, course expectations, etc.). Then perhaps have students contribute **small** pieces of information they have prepared earlier on request from the instructor.
- Have students speak conversationally (early on) about something they know about or want to talk about. This will get them beyond the technology to what they want to say.
- Request the student to **tape-record** a short report or the answer to an assignment question. Then have the student play the tape-recorded material into the microphone when called upon. Set a time limit for the report or answer. Call on the student occasionally for very short "live" answers. When the student is more comfortable with the microphone, tape-recording can be eliminated.

ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

When delivering instruction at a distance, each technology has certain advantages as well as potential limitations. It is wise to consider all aspects of audio conference use when selecting this method of telecommunication. Some factors associated with audio conference use are presented below.

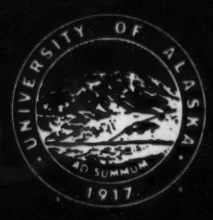
☐ *ADVANTAGES — Audio conferencing:*

- is an interactive medium allowing direct participation by students as well as instructors. Students at several levels have a "give and take" experience with other students at a distance and with instructors and experts who would not otherwise be available.
- provides opportunities for direct feedback in the learning process. Distant learners can participate in the planning and developing of curriculum relevant to their needs.
- learning experiences can be developed by and tailored to the needs of specific learners. Learning experiences consistent with the wealth of cultural traditions and lifestyles represented in Alaska are possible without the learner having to forsake home or lifestyle.
- can be used to share discussion/information with participants from diverse areas.
- allows for discussion and feedback. This allows increased participation by students and can decrease the sense of isolation felt by students at a distance.
- is cost-effective for rural and/or geographically separated areas.
- can be very effective when used in combination with other media, such as print, video, slides.

☐ *LIMITATIONS — Audio conferencing:*

- may encounter some initial resistance until the user is familiar with the equipment and the procedures.
- does not directly allow visuals, which especially impacts the visually-oriented learner.
- can be impersonal because it eliminates nonverbal cues, such as smiles, frowns, arm and hand movement, body stance, etc.
- can experience technical difficulties which interrupt the lesson for part or all of the class.
- places restrictions on the type of content which can be delivered in the oral format.
- requires advance planning and preparation.
- can be expensive, depending on the number of sites participating.

Audio conferencing is interactive, requires a modest amount of easily-operated equipment, is convenient (done from home or a local audio conference site), and allows the instructor/class to cover a large service area. Audio conferencing requires instructor and students to become familiar with the equipment, needs advance planning of message, style, and humanizing techniques, and some students may need special encouragement to participate.



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